

State of Vacant Properties in Rural Georgia

Authors: Odetta Macleish-White, Mallory Rappaport

Across Georgia’s 123 rural counties are thousands of diverse, historic, and beautiful towns and cities. These communities share some common challenges: climate vulnerability, declining economic centers, and loss of critical infrastructure such as broadband connectivity and hospitals. When it comes to vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties, these rural communities face specific barriers: properties are physically farther apart from one another; more properties have issues with unmarketable title, such as heirs’ properties; and the cost of fixing up the property often exceeds its market value or the financial capacity of the owners.

Yet, these same vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties offer great opportunity for solutions to these challenges. They could be the sites of much-needed housing, vibrant local businesses, community gathering spaces, and buffers against extreme weather events. The first step to reclaiming these vacant spaces is understanding the scale of the problem.

This research brief identifies general trends in residential vacancy and distressed properties across rural counties in Georgia to provide a statewide baseline on the quantity and condition of these types of properties. It is an initial and high level overview, intended to be a first step in crafting equitable and effective strategies for repurposing this underutilized land resource.

How Vacant and Abandoned Properties Affect the Community

Vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties—referred to by some as “[blighted properties](#)”—pose significant costs to communities, including:

Harm to Public Health: People living in substandard housing can be exposed to dangerous toxins such as mold, lead, and asbestos—and living with visual evidence of vacancy and disinvestment has been shown to harm [mental health](#) as well. Studies

Defining “Rural”

“Rural” can mean population size, proximity to urban cores, or even cultural and historical characteristics. For this report, Community Progress defines rural counties as those with either a total population under 50,000 or a score of 4 (non-metro) or higher on the US Department of Agriculture’s Rural-Urban Continuum Score.

Photo: A strip of vacant storefronts in Leary, Georgia, located in Calhoun County. (Credit: Amanda Baird / Flickr)



have also demonstrated increases in [violent crime in disinvested neighborhoods](#) with vacant and abandoned properties.

Harm to Individual Wealth: Research has consistently shown that vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties [reduce the value](#) of surrounding properties, leading to decreases in owners’ equity and personal wealth and [higher insurance premiums](#). Residents who lack clear title to their properties are unable to qualify for property repair assistance, receive property tax relief, or sell the property.

Harm to Public Finances: Lower property values and lost tax revenue from vacant and deteriorated properties lead to a reduced tax base even as these properties incur municipal service costs (e.g., fire

response, police response, code enforcement). In the case of heirs' property—wherein a legally designated property owner dies without a probated will, resulting in ownership of their property being equally divided among the owner's descendants—the total value of such properties “trapped” in clouded title can easily reach into the hundreds of millions of dollars. One study of just [three rural Georgia counties](#) estimates that the total assessed value of potential heirs' properties is as high as \$1.75 billion.

Since 2010, the Center for Community Progress has provided urban, suburban, and rural communities battling systemic vacancy with the policies, tools, and resources needed to address the full cycle of property revitalization. Strategies like land banking, land trusts, code compliance reform, and equitable delinquent property tax enforcement can catalyze systemic change if they recognize the historic and contemporary context of each community and set the conditions for equitable outcomes for marginalized and vulnerable people.

About the Data

Community Progress collected and analyzed housing data from the American Community Survey (2006-2010 and 2017-2021) 5-year estimates, University of Wisconsin's 2023 County Health Rankings, and the US Department of Agriculture Rural-Urban Continuum codes. US Census data is the primary data source for this assessment. While it provides data on vacant residential units, it does not account for vacant lots or non-residential properties, leading to more conservative estimates across the state. Units characterized as “Other” vacant by the Census and units that lack complete plumbing facilities were used as supplemental indicators of property distress. While no available classification of vacancy is perfect for each Georgia community, Census data allows us to provide a broad cross-county look at the trends. A close examination of available local data is necessary to tell the most accurate story.

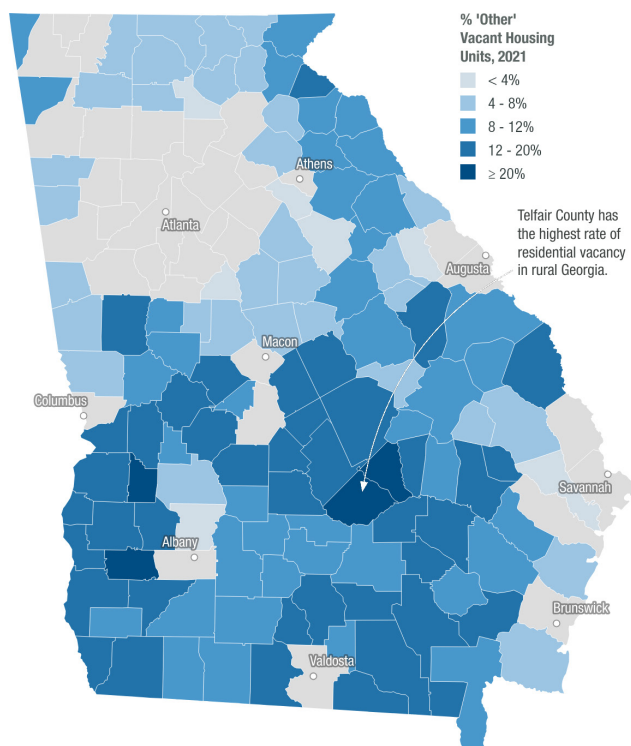
Residential Vacancy Rate by County

Of the seven different categories the US Census Bureau uses to describe vacant housing units, Community Progress typically focuses on “Other” vacant, which describes housing units that do not serve typical functions within the housing market.¹ “Other” vacant housing units often include abandoned

Residential Vacancy Rate by County in Rural Georgia, 2021

Rural counties, shaded in blue, experience rates of residential vacancy from 2 percent to as high as 32 percent in the south of the state. The darker the shade of blue, the higher the percentage of “Other” vacant units in the county.

[\(+\)](#) [Click to view the interactive map](#)



Non-rural counties are shaded in light grey. “Other” vacant is a term used by the Census to categorize units that are neither being held for future occupancy nor used only seasonally.

Map: Center for Community Progress • Source: American Community Survey, 2017-2021.

¹ The seven categories used by the Census Bureau to describe vacant housing units are: Vacant for rent; Rented, but not yet occupied; Vacant for sale; Sold, but not yet occupied; Maintained for seasonal, recreational, and occasional use; Maintained for migrant workers; and Other vacant.

Statewide Trends 2010-2021

	Rural Counties	Non-Rural Counties
Change in Population	+3%	+15%
Change in Households	+3%	+15%
Change in Total Housing Units	+3%	+11%
Change in Percent “Other” Vacant Housing Units	+25%	-1%
As of 2021		
Percent “Other” Vacant Housing Units	9%	4%
Total “Other” Vacant Housing Units	101,342 units	124,365 units
Housing Units Lacking Plumbing	4%	1%
Housing Units Built Before 1979 (Indicator for Lead)	38%	33%

Takeaways

- Rural counties overall experience **double the rate of vacancy** than non-rural counties.
- Residential vacancies **increased 25%** in rural counties but **decreased 1%** in non-rural counties.
- Rural counties had **80 percent less growth** in households and population than non-rural counties.

or neglected properties and can be an important indicator of [systemic vacancy](#).

The map on the previous page displays the percent of “Other” vacant housing units in rural counties using the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates. In 2021, 85 rural counties had a residential vacancy rate above 8 percent. Most striking is that, in the south of the state, Georgia’s rural counties are experiencing rates of residential vacancy reaching up to 32 percent.

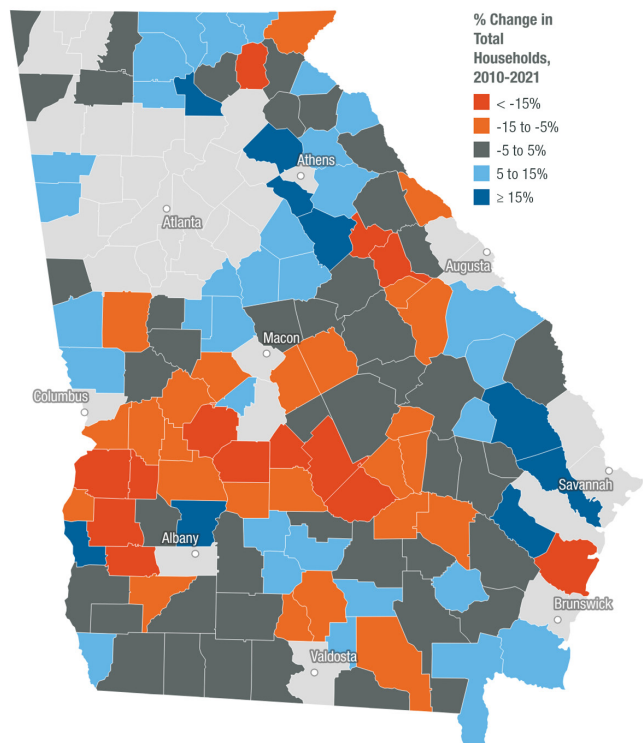
Percent Change in Total Households by County

The following map shows the change in total number of households between 2010 and 2021 using the ACS five-year estimates. Overall, rural counties in Georgia saw only a 3 percent increase in households during this time frame.

Percent Change in Total Households by County in Rural Georgia, 2021

Since 2010, the number of households declined more than 5% in 39 rural counties, concentrated in the south and central part of the state, where “Other” vacant units were also more prevalent.

[\(+ Click to view the interactive map\)](#)



Non-rural counties are shaded in light grey. “Other” vacant is a term used by the Census to categorize units that are neither being held for future occupancy nor used only seasonally.

Map: Center for Community Progress • Source: American Community Survey, 2017-2021.

Health Factors Rank by County

In 2019, Dr. Kim Skobba, Dr. Adenola Osinubi, and Dr. Karen L. Tinsley conducted a [survey](#) of 210 small towns and cities in rural Georgia, to explore the extent of rural vacancy and its relationship to community characteristics. Their findings suggested that economic blight, particularly in the form of dilapidated housing, is prevalent in small towns. They also note:

“Adequate housing and neighborhood conditions are central to the well-being of individuals and families. The physical and psychosocial qualities of housing can have both direct and indirect impacts on health (Shaw 2004). Poor physical conditions, such as mold, safety hazards, and lead paint, are associated with a range of health concerns for both adults and children (Breyse et al. 2004). Living in housing with structural deficiencies and safety hazards is associated with increased accidents, cognitive problems, early onset delinquency among children, and other problems in adolescent functioning (Elliott et al. 2016; Evans 2006; Hernandez and Suglia 2016; Jackson, Newsome, and Lynch 2017).”

Research has shown that greening and maintaining vacant lots can reduce some of the health harms to communities, [improve physical and mental health](#), and [reduce threats to community safety](#).

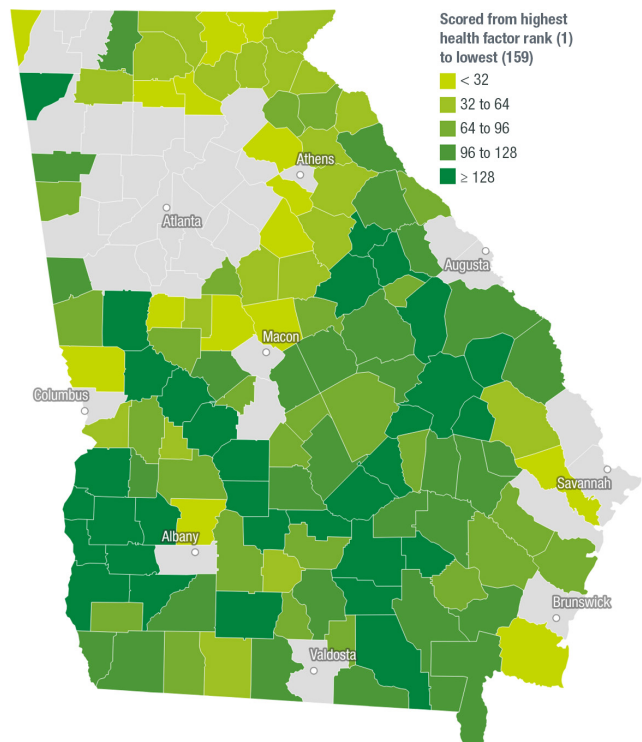
The following map uses the [University of Wisconsin’s 2023 County Health Rankings](#), which aggregate information on health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic factors, and physical environment. Counties are ranked from one (healthiest) to 159 (least healthy). Of the 159 counties in Georgia, the 33 lowest-ranked for health factors were all rural counties.

Understanding the intersections of health outcomes and the presence of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties in a community can set the stage for developing successful interventions.

Health in Rural Georgia, by County, 2023

Based on a study of intersecting factors affecting health (i.e., behaviors, clinical care, social and economic factors, and physical environment) the 33 lowest-ranked for health factors in Georgia were all rural counties.

[\(+\)](#) [Click to view the interactive map](#)



Non-rural counties are shaded in light grey.

Map: Center for Community Progress • Source: University of Wisconsin Community Health Rankings, 2023.

Top 20 Rural Georgia Counties with Highest Residential Vacancy Rates, 2021

[\(+\)](#) Click to view the interactive chart and data on all counties

County	% 'Other' Vacant Housing Units, 2021 ▾	'Other' Vacant Housing Units, 2021	% Change in 'Other' Vacant Housing Units, 2010-2021
Telfair	32%	1,571	331%
Wheeler	25%	600	278%
Calhoun	23%	474	27%
Webster	22%	270	189%
Twiggs	20%	790	15%
Dodge	19%	1,683	133%
Wilcox	19%	661	62%
Quitman	19%	336	323%
Appling	18%	1,556	47%
Clay	17%	356	450%
Randolph	17%	572	617%
Jefferson	17%	1,214	88%
Wilkinson	17%	719	15%
Laurens	16%	3,597	85%
Terrell	16%	690	423%
Dooly	16%	794	20%
Macon	16%	839	30%
Ware	16%	2,543	71%
Baker	16%	242	192%
Bleckley	16%	822	24%

"Other" vacant is a term used by the Census to categorize units that are neither being held for future occupancy nor only used seasonally.

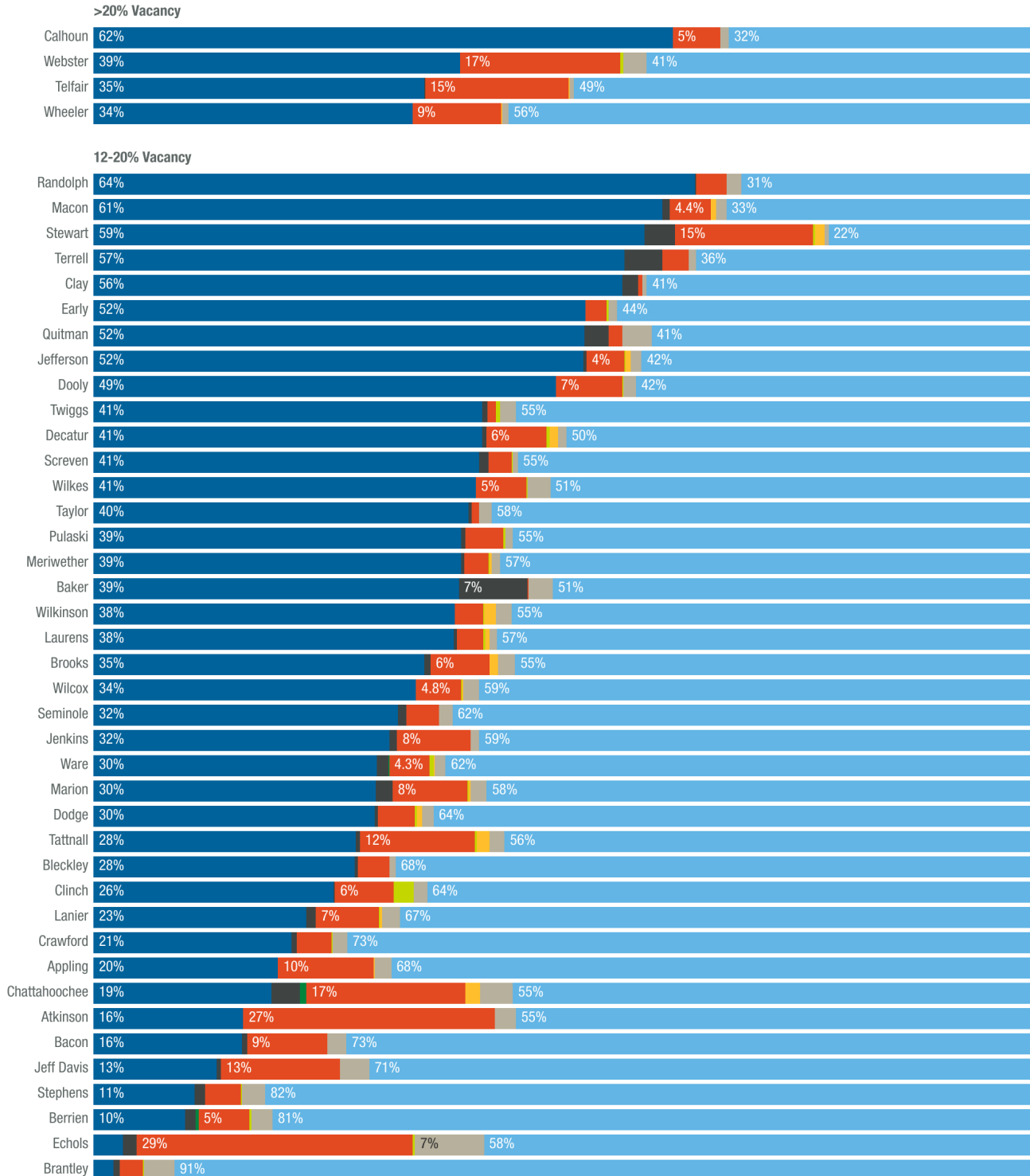
Map: Center for Community Progress • Source: American Community Survey, 2004-2010 and 2017-2021.

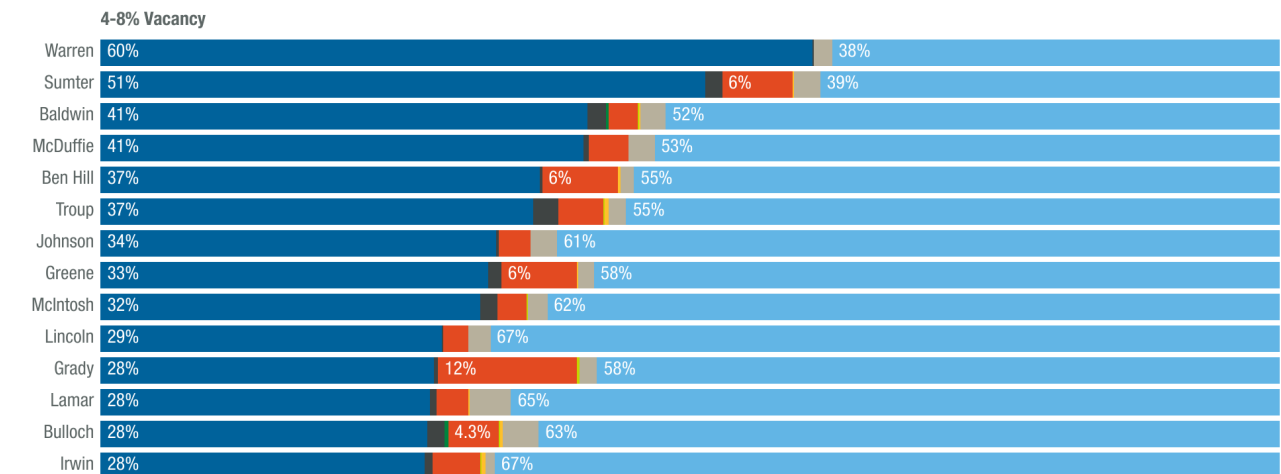
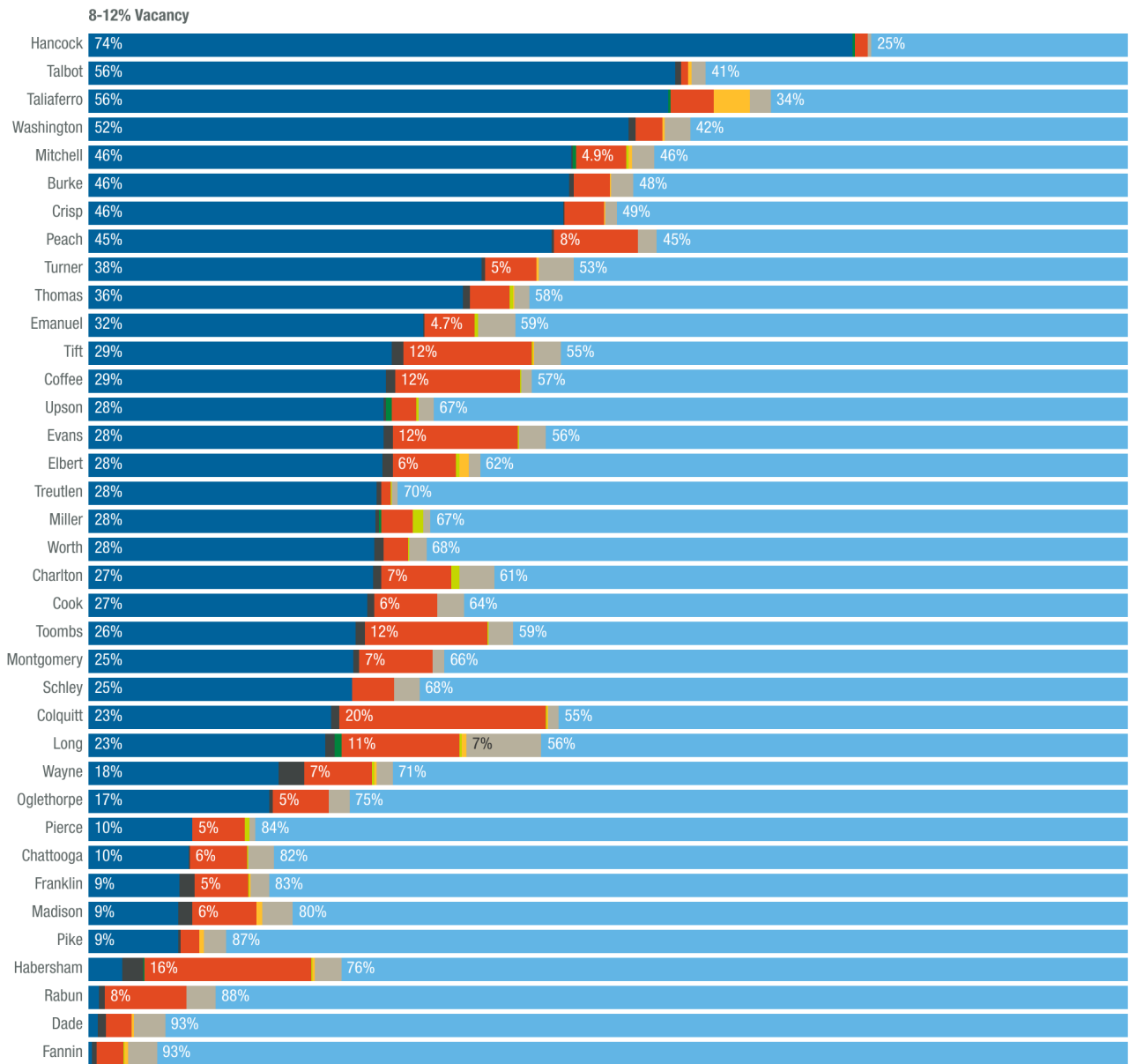
Race, Ethnicity, and Residential Vacancy in Rural Georgia

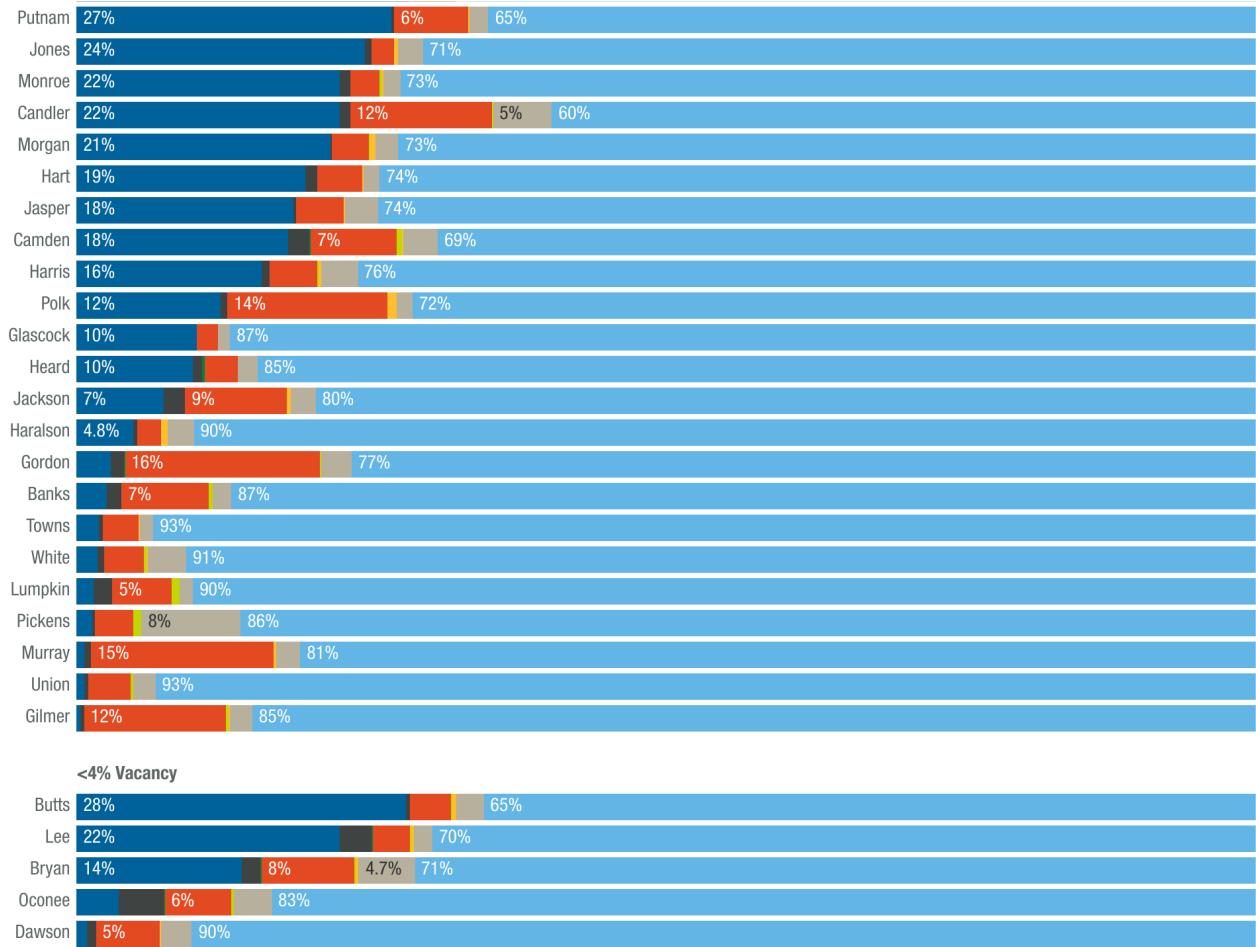
Counties with the highest rates of “Other” vacant residential properties tended to have larger populations of color than counties with fewer vacant properties.

[\(+ Click to view the interactive table\)](#)

■ Black
 ■ Asian
 ■ Hispanic
 ■ Hawaiian Native
 ■ Other Race
 ■ Native American
 ■ Two or More Races
 ■ White







“Other” vacant is a term used by the Census to categorize units that are neither being held for future occupancy nor only used seasonally.

Chart: Center for Community Progress • Source: American Community Survey, 2004-2010 and 2017-2021

Overall Takeaways

- Eighty-five rural counties had an “Other” vacant rate above 8 percent in 2017-2021.
- Black households are disproportionately impacted by vacancies. Rural counties with the highest Black population percentage corresponded with higher vacancy rates in 2017-2021.
- Rural counties are disproportionately impacted by negative health factors. In Georgia, rural counties make up the first 33 ranked lowest for health factors according to the 2023 County Health Rankings. These health factors include physical environment and socioeconomic factors.

About the Center for Community Progress

The Center for Community Progress helps people to transform vacant spaces into vibrant places. Since 2010, their team of experts has provided urban, suburban, and rural communities battling systemic vacancy with the policies, tools, and resources needed to address the full cycle of property revitalization. As the only national nonprofit dedicated to tackling vacant properties, Community Progress drives change by uncovering and disrupting the unjust, racist systems that perpetuate entrenched vacancy and property deterioration. To learn more and get help for your community, visit communityprogress.org.